

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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The well-named butterfly bush delights us again

By Jim May

Virginia is an incredibly diverse state. With elevations from sea level to over 6,000 feet, soils that range from sand to silt to clay, and climates from cool mountain hollows to hot sunny beaches, we've got it all. Finding a plant that will thrive in that wide range of conditions is a little tricky, but I think that one of my summertime favorites, the butterfly bush (*Buddleia* spp.), fills the bill perfectly.

This plant is also called the summer lilac, although I think butterfly bush is a much more appropriate name. It not only attracts butterflies in profusion; it draws them in like a powerful magnet as they pass through the garden in search of nectar.

Butterfly bush does best in full sun in moist, well-drained, fertile soils, but is very adaptable to poor soils, dry soils, and soils of various pH. It is also tolerant of heat, drought, and high humidity, making it an ideal plant for this summer.

The genus (*Buddleia*) was named after the Reverend Adam Buddle, a 17th century English botanist. The plant named in his honor was brought from Chile and was the globe butterfly bush (*B. globosa*).

The most popular species (*B. davidii*) originally came from China. Its other name, summer lilac, comes from its large, fragrant upright flower panicles, similar in shape to the common lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*). It comes in every color imaginable including white, lavender, blue, pink, mauve, dark purple, magenta and yellow.

This medium to large-sized shrub grows rapidly and reaches 8 -15 feet in height if never pruned. Even with radical spring pruning, it reaches 8 feet tall by fall. I have tried pruning this plant several different ways and get different effects each way.

In parts of the state with milder winters, much of the gray-green foliage of this plant will persist throughout the year. Even in the coldest parts, where the shoots get frozen back, spring pruning will bring this hardy plant back to life.

Buddleia davidii blooms on new wood and pruning it to about 12 to 18 inches off the ground just as growth is starting in the early spring is best if you want the largest flowers. Tip pruning can be done in June as a way to attempt to keep this rapid grower in bounds and force it to bush out more rather than grow taller. I've had some success with this method and it has the added effect of holding off blooms by several weeks and making them last longer into the fall.

The third way to prune is not to prune at all and just let this monster go wild. This brings the earliest blooms, but the flowers are smaller. Deadhead butterfly bush as the flowers fade so the small side branches will form larger flower heads. This can extend the bloom time by quite a few weeks.

This aptly named shrub is known and grown mostly for its flowers and when in full bloom can be seen covered with dozens of butterflies. It is grown mainly as a specimen plant, but when planted in mass can also be very effective and eye-catching.

Its gray-green foliage is neutral and blends in with plants around it. When mixed with ornamental grasses, its open, gangly shape takes on a sudden gracefulness.

Some *Buddleia* species, like *B. alternifolia*, *B. asiatica*, *B. colvilei* and *B. globosa*, bloom on last year's wood. They provide nectar for spring and early-summer butterflies, and these species should not be pruned until after blossoming.

The fountain butterfly bush (*B. alternifolia*) is the most cold-hardy and can grow more than 12 feet tall. Though not as fragrant as *B. davidii*, it blooms several weeks earlier and has arching branches that are covered with lilac-purple flowers.

Since fountain butterfly bush blooms on the previous season's wood, you need to prune it right after blooming. If you wait too long, you will be removing next year's flower buds.

The third type of butterfly bush is a hybrid cross of *B. davidii* and *B. globosa*. The result is the Weyer butterfly bush (*B. x weyeriana*). This shrub comes in several shades of yellow and has globe-shaped flowers that bloom several weeks later than the other species. It is not quite as heat-tolerant or cold hardy as the others and should be pruned in the early spring.

Butterfly bushes thrive in hot summers and this year has been picture perfect for them. Other heat lovers to mix with them in the landscape include daylilies (*Hemerocallis*), coreopsis (*Coreopsis* spp.), yarrow (*Achillea* spp.), blanket flower (*Gaillardia* spp.), black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia* spp.), lamb's ear (*Stachys byzantina*), butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), liatris (*Liatris* spp.) and all types of ornamental grasses.

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.